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ABSTRACT

Although tech prep is becoming widely accepted by educators and the business community, the jury is still out regarding whether its anticipated student, school, and community outcomes are being realized. In theory, tech prep's focus is primarily on school-based learning, whereas school-to-work programs also include work-based learning and linkages between the two. The distinction is less clear when the core elements required for tech prep vary among tech prep consortia (as has been reported in the literature). Imprecision in defining the differences between tech prep and school-to-work has created confusion and frustration among the two initiatives' stakeholders. To date, few formal evaluations of tech prep have been conducted to document its claims. Merging tech prep and school-to-work concepts will make it more difficult to evaluate the results of the two reforms. The increased business and industry support enjoyed by tech prep has been one of its most positive outcomes. Because moving students through secondary and on to postsecondary education requires the development of academic and higher-order thinking skills required in the workplace, tech prep is especially valuable for noncollege-bound students. Thanks to its articulation components, however, tech prep is also proving valuable for college-bound students. (MN)

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Tech Prep: Is It Working?
Myths and Realities

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Myths and REALITIES
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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Tech Prep: Is It Working?

Tech prep has become more widely accepted by educators and the business community as real changes have been made in curriculum, courses, and programs. However, the jury is still out about whether the anticipated student, school, and community outcomes are being realized. This ***Myths and Realities*** examines the extent to which tech prep is succeeding as a unique effort, living up to the claims that have been made for it.

Tech Prep: Another Name for School-to-Work

Over the years, educators have been challenged by a number of federal, state, and local initiatives that profess to result in better educational outcomes for students. Highly marketed at their inception, many of the initiatives ultimately fade into obscurity, some absorbed as part of other programs. Examinations of tech prep and its relationship to school-to-work initiatives point to the distinctions that make each of the two programs unique and highlight the characteristics that make them similar.

Program focus is the most distinguishing feature that differentiates tech prep from school to work. Tech prep's focus is primarily on school-based learning, whereas school-to-work programs also include work-based learning and linkages between the two. The distinction is less clear when the core elements required for tech prep vary among tech prep consortia, as they are reported to do (Owens 1996). For example, when tech prep adds elements that include work-based and career guidance components, it becomes similar to school-to-work, which may explain why some educators are seeing little or no difference between the two. Of the 100 persons surveyed at the 1996 American Vocational Association Convention, however, only 15 percent saw tech prep and school-to-work as being exactly the same (Bragg 1996).

Most of the surveyed tech prep consortia did not see the two efforts as synonymous, but perceived tech prep as a component of school to work: 35% of the respondents considered tech prep to be the foundation for school to work; 50% considered tech prep to be under the school-to-work umbrella (ibid). However, for funding as well as program issues, most local tech prep coordinators believe that tech prep should retain its unique identity to ensure that the benefits of its processes and procedures are not lost or duplicated by school-to-work (Bragg et al. 1997). Survey responses from 42 of 50 state directors of vocational-technical education showed agreement with the view that tech prep is one option within school to work and that its identity needs to remain strong (Dykman 1995).

Imprecision in defining the two reforms can create confusion and frustration among all stakeholders. At one of the five field sites studied during the 1996-1997 academic year, for example, tech prep was "viewed as a premier approach to STW for more academically talented students, incorporating both school-based and work-based components. In this site, other approaches such as cooperative learning were encouraged for the rest of the student population, creating the potential for a two-tier approach to STW" (Bragg et al. 1997, p. 51).

To date, no formal evaluations of tech prep have been conducted to document its claims. "Of nearly 50% of all local Tech Prep consortia in the United States, 40% reported they had not even begun to implement formal evaluations of their Tech Prep programs. Another 30% indicated their consortia were in the planning stage of evaluation, showing only a minority of Tech Prep consortia were actively implementing formal evaluations, and most of these were very, very preliminary" (Bragg et al. 1997, p. 7). Merging of tech prep and school to work concepts will make it more difficult to evaluate the results of the two reform efforts.

Tech Prep Is Losing Momentum

One of the most positive outcomes of tech prep program implementation is the increased acceptance and support it has received from business and industry. In Washington State, for example, "two-thirds or more of the tech prep consortia reported that businesses provided facility tours or other career awareness events and helped develop curriculum, define desired outcomes and support staff development. Half of the consortia reported business help in youth apprenticeship and/or worksite learning slots and in providing speakers and/or classroom instructors" (Owens 1996, p. 4).

In a 1995 follow-up survey of local tech prep coordinators previously surveyed in 1993, 92.3 percent of the respondents indicated their view that vocational faculty offered the greatest support to the implementation of tech prep. Other interest groups seen as offering a "good" to "excellent" level of support were state agency personnel, local two-year postsecondary administrators, business/industry representatives, local secondary administrators, and students. Parents, counselors, and academic faculty were perceived as the most skeptical of tech prep, as were 4-year college/university personnel (Bragg et al. 1997).

Scruggs (1996) stresses the need for increased communication with all tech prep stakeholders: parents, students, teachers, counselors, educational administrators, and members of business, industry, and labor. To be accepting and understanding of tech prep, the public must be informed of components and goals of tech prep, the benefits that tech prep offers students, and the details of implementation and progress. By becoming part of the struggle, these stakeholders can better appreciate and help to facilitate the intended outcomes.

Amazingly, many tech prep students themselves are unaware of its details and components. In Washington State, for example, many secondary students involved in tech prep were unable to recognize the components of tech prep and were unaware of the process for transferring articulated credits to community colleges (Owens

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1996). Clearly, students and parents need more information from school counselors and teachers.

One of the outcomes that can be highlighted is the integration of academic and vocational education, an educational change realized through tech prep, especially at the secondary level. The following percentages show the proportion of tech prep consortia implementing applied academics (commercially or locally developed) to existing curriculum in both secondary and postsecondary institutions (Bragg et al. 1997, p. 53).

1992-1993		1994-1995	
Secondary	Postsecondary	Secondary	Postsecondary
86.4%	37.7%	88.8%	41.3%

Because moving students through secondary and on to postsecondary education requires the development of academic and higher-order thinking skills required in the workplace, tech prep has a special value for noncollege-bound students, and, possibly for the college bound as well.

Tech Prep Is Not for College-Bound Students

Tech prep was intended for the "neglected majority," those students not expected to pursue postsecondary education. Thus, an essential component of tech prep is a core of required courses in mathematics, science, communications (including applied academics), and technologies in the 2 years of secondary school preceding graduation and 2 years of higher education or at least a 2-year apprenticeship following secondary instruction (Scruggs 1996, p. 13). These essential articulation components, however, are not intended to exclude those who may wish to move on to a four-year college. The perceptions of local coordinators surveyed about this issue show that the proportion of respondents who viewed tech prep as for all students rose from 11% to 16% from 1993-1995 (Bragg et al. 1997).

Owens (1996) states that tech prep has made a case for workplace learning for college-bound as well as noncollege-bound students. In Washington State, "tech prep has helped educate and influence the attitude of many students and parents about the need for workplace preparation for those planning to enter a four-year college program as well as those planning to enter a community/technical college or go directly into the workplace" (p. 8). Reporting on data for 197 tech prep graduates who have pursued training beyond high school, Owens (1996) notes that 152 of the graduates enrolled in community colleges and 27 in four-year colleges. "Over the last year, tech prep students have begun entering community colleges, more tech prep materials have been produced, more articulation agreements have been completed, and more students are involved in career pathways and work-based learning" (p. 5).

Today, every potential worker must develop the academic and vocational skills required in an increasingly complex and high tech workplace, skills that required postsecondary education. "To get a job right after high school that pays a living wage, you will need to be able to think as well as a college-going kid. In our future economy, almost every adult will go on to future education. So a high school education needs to prepare them for that" (Pennington 1996, p. 25.)

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